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out of 5

Live at the Variety Playhouse

By Aric Mitchell on December-18-2008 in [Disc Reviews](#)

Overall 

Film 

Video 

Audio 

Extras 



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Released Tuesday, October 28, 2008

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What ever happened to Shawn Mullins?

I often mull over this question whenever I hear him sing, “Ev-e-ry thing’s gonna be all right... Rockabye! Rockabye!” on the radio. The dude lands in the late nineties with this song that has maybe the most unimaginative chorus in the history of pop music, and then he bolts on us, leaving that small remnant to get stuck in our collective heads for the rest of our humdrum lives.

Did he retire to a nice quiet suburb with wife and kids in tow? Does he make those cheese roll-ups I like so much at the local Taco Bell? Is he even still breathing? I got the answer to all my questions when I received *Shawn Mullins: Live at the Variety Playhouse* from the powers-that-be here at Upcoming Discs. Apparently, he is still making music; and surprisingly enough, he’s pretty friggin’ good at it.

This DVD presents 15 of his best songs, including the one he’s most known for, in a simple 75-minute presentation that should motivate fans of folk, coffee shop, and what I like to call West Coast country to give his music (and career) another shot.

One notable weakness of Mullins is that he appears nervous when he’s not performing. He doesn’t quite know how to work a crowd, and as a result, he typically plays to very small venues. The impression I received from his interactions with the audience is that he prefers things the way they are, and that the possibility of superstardom sort of freaks him out. Not to worry, he gets to do what he loves for a dominant majority of the presentation, and we’re all better off for it.

The night begins with six solo tracks, just a man and his acoustic guitar. “Twin Rocks, Oregon” is a tame ballad with Kenny Rogers content and Barry White delivery. “Home,” “For America,” and “Fraction of a Man” are all intimate portraits with interesting stories behind their characters. “Ballad of Billy Joe McKay” adds a small dose of, at this point in the concert, much-needed humor; and “Lonesome, I Know You Too Well” syncs us back to the overall tone of melancholy.

Then the band comes out. Highlights include “Lullaby” (I admit, still a good song); “Beautiful Wreck,” which also enjoyed some radio air time; a twang-y, chill “Anchored in You”; and the best song of the night, the upbeat murder ballad “Cold Black Heart.” Honorable mentions: “Shimmer,” “Cabbagetown,” “The Ballad of Kathryn Johnston,” “All in My Head,” and a solid cover of “House of the Rising Sun.”

Color me impressed. Give this a shot, you won’t be disappointed.

Video

Visuals are sort of static. The top third of your screen is deep black or midnight blues-y. The stage is done up with dim lighting. We don’t get a hint of the audience, so it’s hard to tell how many were in attendance. Image is pretty clean throughout, though the few colors here have a slight bleeding effect. Flesh tones are a little off, erring to the brighter side of the scale. It can be a little distracting, but it’s overall a passable full frame presentation (1.33:1 scale).

Audio

Two tracks are included: a 5.1 and 2.0. It’s good to have choices. The 5.1 is the better of the two, but not to an overwhelming degree. The songs performed with full band ensemble open it up a bit. For a third of the DVD, Mullins is simply strumming his guitar and belting out tunes in what I would call a deep tenor. The last nine songs, however, offer more variety of sound, and Vanguard has done a solid job conveying that with the 5.1 presentation. Both are high on volume and dialog levels, and professionally executed.

Special Features

Vanguard at least makes an effort, and that I can appreciate. A 15-minute interview with Shawn Mullins follows the artist from his discovery by the Indigo Girls to his first recording contract with a major label. It’s short but revealing. There is also a music video for “Beautiful Wreck,” black-and-white and presented in widescreen. Last and for once not least is a concert slide show set to music, one of the best songs on the entire disc, but alas, no title. It involves a train, though.

Final Thoughts

Turns out Shawn Mullins is alive, well, and still earning a respectable living doing what it is he loves: writing songs and singing them for a small but loyal following. After my chance encounter with his new live concert DVD, I’m proud to include myself in the group, adding in my own small way to his number... one that, let’s hope, will keep growing at a steady clip.

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